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MORAL FORCES IN DEALING WITH THE LABOR QUESTION.*

THERE are no doubt many who see little connection between morals and the labor question. Morals means, to their mind, to be temperate, to be chaste, to keep one's promises, to do one's work faithfully, and they hardly see what this has to do with the struggles of the laboring world, save in so far as working-men by practising these virtues might get on better than some of them do. The labor question has a far-away or else a disagreeable sound to their ears; it seems like a class question turning on squabbles over wages; it brings up thoughts to their minds of dissatisfied, restless people,—perhaps of angry people, ready to do violence. They do not find the discussion of it edifying, nor see why mention should be made of it from the pulpit or platform, save in the form of a rebuke to violence or of counsels to peace. Such is no doubt the feeling of some good, but not overthoughtful, or instructed, persons.

Then there are others who have thought some on the question, but who are convinced that it is a purely economic question, with which ethics has nothing to do. They think that all that happens in the world of industry is governed by certain laws; that it is useless to interfere with them; that the wages of labor, like the prices of other commodities, are determined in this way, and that it is as foolish to try to raise them or to prevent their falling by making demands or forming combinations or entering on "strikes," as it would be to interfere with any of the laws of nature by the same means. They would, perhaps, like to see laborers better off than they are, but they say it is impossible, or only possible, in case they better the quality or increase the quantity of their work. Hence it does little good, they think, to talk of justice and love and brotherhood in this connection, and in times of social

* The substance of this paper was given before the World's Fair Labor Congress, August 31, 1893.

excitement they may even deprecate or resent it, for these are sentiments, they hold, that apply to the private or inner, not the business, life of men. They will readily admit that ethics is very good for the family, for friends, and as a personal ideal for men; but the world of industry and business, the world to which the labor question belongs, is a world apart and has its own laws and rules. Such is the opinion of not a few who have given some thought to the labor question.

On the other hand, there are those who take what are called radical views on the question, who think that ethics has little to do with it. They believe that the inevitable trend of things is toward socialism, that the march of events is bound to give working-men more and more power, that ultimately the present possessing classes will be dispossessed, the expropriators, as Karl Marx * said, be expropriated. I remember the cool, nonchalant way in which August Spies † once in my hearing in Chicago dismissed ethical ideals as without appreciable influence on the economic order and development of society. Morality, he thought, was dependent on economic conditions, and had little power to change them; it might be a fruit of the tree of industry, but was not a root or a cause in any proper sense of the word. And so he coincided with the view before mentioned, only holding that things would take a new turn in the future, and that the contradictions of the present order would inevitably in time give birth to a socialistic order in which working-men would have an advantage which they have not now.

Now, as against these views, I can only say how the matter appears to me. My idea of morality is different, and my idea of the laws of the industrial world is different, from those I have described. Undoubtedly a certain sort of morality has little to do with the labor question; but it seems to me conventional rather than real morality. Undoubtedly there are laws of the industrial world, and there may be some necessary

* "Das Kapital," Erster Band, S. 790.

† Editor of the Chicago *Arbeiter-Zeitung*, and afterwards hung for alleged complicity with the Haymarket bomb.

laws, but the laws that regulate the remuneration of the laborer are not necessary laws, so far as I can see,—laws, that is, which moral impulses and ideals are powerless to affect.

I cannot imagine a morality that is not as much a social matter as an individual matter. I recognize all that is summed up under the head of personal morality; but the essential principle of morality is justice, and justice is as much social as personal. We cannot limit ourselves and say *we* will be good, however we treat others. Our treatment of others is a measure of our goodness. In dealing with others we must be just, and justice consists in giving them their full dues, in respecting them on their own account, in remembering that they have the same nature and the same ends of existence as ourselves. Hence, wherever two men are dealing with one another, the law of justice—the law of mutual respect and regard—applies; it applies just as much in a business dealing, in buying and selling, in fixing wages, as in any transaction between friends or between members of the same household. It is impossible, then, to set off the industrial world as a field by itself, and say that the transactions that are going on there are beyond the scope of true moral principles. Practically speaking, moral sentiments may have little enough influence there; but it will not do to say that they are inapplicable.

And what really are the economic laws against which these sentiments are supposed to be powerless? The laws now in question are of course those bearing on the remuneration of laborers. So far as I can make out, these laws (or law) amount about to this: That one in selling anything he has in his possession endeavors to get all he can for it, and that one in buying anything endeavors to pay as little as possible for it; or, to make an application to the matter in hand, those who hire labor want to get it as cheaply as possible, and those who sell it want to sell it as dear as possible. As the motive of self-interest urges persons to act in this way, and as self-interest is so deep and tolerably constant a motive in men, this way of acting may, if we will, be called a law of action. But can we say that moral impulses are powerless against it? The

law, it must be remembered, is not something outside man, but a law of man, a law of his will; to say, then, that this law cannot be interfered with is to say that there is but one motive that can possibly influence man (that of self-interest); which is to say, in turn, that a man cannot act for others as well as for himself, that human nature is somehow such that thoughts and impulses of justice and love cannot get a place or exert an influence within it. Now human experience belies any such notion. I cannot stop to prove this. But every one knows it. Individuals now and then act unselfishly, and sometimes whole communities are animated by an unselfish enthusiasm. In the family, any one would be thought unnatural who always considered simply his own interests and never acted for the benefit of wife or child, of husband or parent. Professional men and women sometimes give their services away; persons in business sometimes do what they would never do if their concern was for themselves alone. The law of buying as cheaply as one can, or of selling as dear as one can, is not a necessary law any more than any other law born of self-interest; thoughts of equity may interfere with it, thoughts of the situation and needs of others, thoughts of what one would like were he in the place of others, thoughts of what is due to those with whom we are dealing as our fellow-men and our brothers. I do not say that the economic law now under discussion is thus commonly interfered with; but I do say that it might be interfered with, and it is simply absurd, simply indicates confusion of mind, to speak of it as absolute and unchangeable in any such way as the law of gravitation is.* The law is born of the human will and the will can change. What moral forces are *going* to accomplish, I do not undertake to say. I am now concerned only to maintain that there is room for them,

* Cf. the mystical language of Professor W. G. Sumner: "Supply and demand are together the ultimate force or fact to the economist. They are to him what gravity is to the astronomer or chemical affinity to the chemist. We want to know the mode of their action, but *the reason of it is beyond our reach.*"—*Princeton Review*, November, 1882, p. 250. (The italics are mine.)

possible play for them; that they are not barred out in the nature of the case, as some would think.

And now—briefly, and yet as clearly as possible—what do we mean by the labor question? It may, of course, mean many things; but what I have in mind now is the problem how the laborer can share more fully than he ordinarily does in the wealth he helps to produce. The problem has many branches and covers many details; but this, as I now use the phrase, is the gist and the upshot of it. How can the laborer as he is,—and not by becoming a different being from what he is,—how can the laborer as he is, and performing the useful function in society that he does, get more of the wealth he helps to create, and what part can moral forces play in contributing to this result? This is the subject to which I address myself.

In the first place, I think that the forces of conscience might help by making men feel that there *is* a labor question. I do not think that there is any wide or deep sense of it at the present time, any more than there was a wide or deep sense of the slavery question a century ago. Of course, we all know that laborers often seek for better returns for their labor, and sometimes are very obstinate in their demands. But so do landlords often seek for more rent; so do leaders in business enterprise often seek for more profits. We do not therefore speak of a landlord problem or an employer problem; and why should we *merely for a reason of this sort* speak of a labor problem? The fact is, we can only speak of a labor problem, in the real sense of the word, if the laborer not merely fails to get what he would like, but if he fails to get what, according to some standard of right, we think he is *entitled* to. Working-men must be not merely an unsuccessful class, but in some way a wronged class, if public sentiment is to dignify their situation by viewing it as giving rise to a problem. A problem hardly arises simply because a man does not get all he wants in this world (*i.e.*, any other than a personal problem for the individual concerned).

Now, the notion of any right in this matter, the notion of what the laborer is entitled to, is very vague in the public

mind. Some think he is entitled simply to what he can get,—*i.e.*, that there is no rule in the matter. Others think he is entitled to what he agreed to work for, whatever the circumstances in which he made the agreement. Some among laborers themselves seem to think they are entitled to all that is produced. Between these extremes the sober view that every one who contributes to the wealth of society is entitled to enough to enable him to live a properly human life, is yet to find any extensive following. The basis, thus, for any deep sense of a labor problem hardly exists. With the working-men, personal or class interest is apt to urge them on. But the outside world can hardly see why working-men should have more wages than why employers should have more profits. Many there are who hold that every one should accept the lot in life which seems assigned to him by Providence; that one should bear poverty as one does the other ills of life. Others would like to make out that poverty is a blessing rather than an evil. There is no clear general perception that the end of life is the development of the total humanity that is in us, and that these possibilities are precious in all men. For if this is true, there is no (so-called “Providential”) lot of men with which they should be content, short of one in which they are progressively realizing the possibilities of their natures. If this is true, wealth comes to have a meaning and purpose beyond itself, for it is a means for setting men free and enabling them to live for something beyond the satisfaction of their animal necessities; and it is just as important that one person should have it (or be able to acquire it) as that another should.

A fundamental clarification of moral ideas is therefore necessary. “Good” people are as deficient in this respect as others. Most good Christian people saw no wrong in slavery until comparatively recent times, and when they *were* moved, it was more, I suspect, by hearing tales of suffering than by the thought of wrong. “Goodness” is a matter of instinct and habit, a more or less irrational thing; it needs to be put on a rational basis, in which case it might be a much more extensive quantity and have a more extensive influence. For

if all men should have the opportunity to live a developed human life, if a part of the rational meaning of goodness is in seeking such a consummation, then it must become nothing less than shocking to the moral sense that large classes of men should be shut off from this opportunity and sacrificed for the benefit of others, as many working-men are now. Meagre wages and long hours of labor are wrong not merely because the laborer does not like them; he may be so demoralized by them that he loses the spirit to strive for anything else. They are wrong because they prevent his living, save in exceptional cases, more than an animal life (and not even that for as long a period as others, the mortality among the poor being exceptionally great). Meagre wages means not merely that it is impossible to provide properly for the material basis of existence, but that to develop and nourish the mind, to feed one's sense of beauty, and to give one's self the surroundings that a human being ought to have, are equally out of the question. Long hours of toil mean that one is fit for little but toil, that one's higher capacities are deadened or never brought into play. One with a clarified conscience is driven to ask *why* large classes of his fellow-men are compelled to live under these conditions; he explores the causes, he searches out remedies,—in other words, the labor problem is already upon him; his ideal convictions have brought him face to face with it, whether he wishes to face it or no.

Conscience, if awakened and rationalized, might thus perform a service in bringing it home to the general consciousness that there is a labor problem. If working-men were contented with existing conditions and demanded nothing, there would be a labor problem all the same, or rather all the more,—for then a part of the problem would be, to arouse the working-men to a sense of their dignity and responsibility as human beings.

But there is a still closer connection between morality and the labor problem. A true moral sense not only makes us aware of the problem, it makes us see that in essence it is a moral problem. Undoubtedly what share of wealth working-men can receive has necessary limits, which morality is power-

less to affect. I even admit that it does not of itself follow that, because all men should live developed human lives, all can. Nature may not be generous enough in providing resources, or human wit may not, at any given time, be equal to the task of successfully appropriating or developing them. This is only saying that there may not be wealth enough to go round. But this is not the state of affairs in modern civilized communities. Even in Russia there is probably wealth enough. But everywhere the laborers get proportionally a small share of it. They are as essential as employers, landlords, capitalists, generals, and kings; but these classes, by some means or other, get, if not all they want, all they could in conscience well ask for, while working-men, as a rule, get little more than enough to enable them to live and propagate their kind. Inequity would thus appear to be stamped on the face of modern industrial society. It is sometimes urged that this is natural and inevitable. But, as I hinted at the outset, this is just what is not true. Profits, rent, interest, salaries of State and other officials are not any more than wages determined by laws over which men have no control. They are all the result of human bargaining or convention. Men may take more or they may take less for their services. No one in his senses can imagine that there is any natural law which obliges a railroad president to take \$25,000 or \$50,000 a year as his salary. Nor is rent determined by any natural law,—any law over and above the will of the landlord, I mean. Landlords are simply apt to take all they can get. So with interest and profits. There may well be limits beyond which these cannot go; but if one is willing to take a return of four per cent. instead of six per cent. on his investment, there is no law—natural, human, or divine—to prevent him. Talk about inevitable economic laws governing the distribution of wealth is economic rhetoric rather than science.

The simple fact is, that landlords, capitalists, and employers are, as a rule, in a position of advantage, and working-men are at a disadvantage, in making their respective bargains. The quantity of land, the quantity of capital, the quantity of employing or business talent, is limited; while the quantity of

labor, particularly of the lower grades of labor, is, comparatively speaking, unlimited. But to whatever extent there is a limited supply or monopoly of a commodity, the owner of it can take advantage of those who want to use or purchase it; while to the extent that a commodity is abundant and the competition sharp between those who offer it for sale, to that extent they may be taken advantage of, however useful their commodity may be. The competition between laborers being then so great as to be practically unlimited, they may be taken advantage of to a practically unlimited degree,—or rather the only limit of the lowness of the amount they receive for their labor is in what they must have to sustain themselves upon and perform their labor. Hence riches on the one hand and poverty on the other. And all this is summed up by saying that the separation between the two classes of society, instead of being a part of the natural or normal or Divine order, is, speaking generally, and leaving out of account exceptional cases, the result of some taking an advantage, and of others being taken advantage of,—that is, of injustice.

This is what I mean by saying that the labor problem is in essence a problem in ethics. Working-men do not have what they ought to have to enable them to live developed human lives, and what now at least—taking into account the wonderful advances of the modern industrial world—they might have; and the reason why they do not have it is that, being many, they are weak, and are taken advantage of by the other members of society. “We are tired of working to make other people rich,” said a factory girl once in Chicago, who was out with others of her class on a strike. Here, in every-day language, is the gist of the labor problem. The labor of the working-class is for others’ benefit rather than their own; the employer gains by it, the landowner gains by it, the capitalist gains by it; but the laborer frequently gets from it only the pittance which enables him to refresh his vital forces and go on working. He allows himself to be thus taken advantage of because he cannot help it,—because, whether wisely or foolishly, he would rather live on whatever terms than not live at all. By no means do I say or imply that the employer does

not do a service, or that the landlord—so long as the private ownership of land is permitted—does not do a service, or that the capitalist does not do a service. I do not see that in principle either profits or rent or interest are wrong. I hold that those among working-men who say that all that is produced is rightfully theirs, are extravagant and deluded,—though over-estimation of one's self has sometimes more of the promise and potency of life and progress in it than a submissive under-estimation. I simply say that the laborer renders a service along with the rest, a service equally necessary to the social organism and equally honorable with that which others render, and hence, that he should be rewarded in something like the same way, on something like the same scale, with the rest. In other words, there should be a substantial equality of conditions, and the cause of inequality (I do not mean absolutely, but to the extent it exists and has generally existed in the world) is not nature or God, but, to put it quite tersely, greed,—as Menander hinted in giving a counsel, on which Matthew Arnold enlarges, "Seek equality and eschew greed." *

But if the labor problem is at bottom a moral problem, the only radical solution of it must be a moral solution. This does not mean that external changes may not have their place,—changes in law and custom, changes in the machinery of the social system. But the moral solution must come first and be their precursor. "Without a change of principles," exclaimed Marcus Aurelius, "what else is there than the slavery of men who groan while they pretend to obey?" † It might be better that some men should be slaves than that they should do grave harm to the social organism; at the same time the best service, both morally and economically, is always willing service. By a moral solution of the labor problem I mean a change in the thoughts and dispositions of men: I mean new ideas and ideals, new ambitions, new motives and rules of action in the private heart. I confess that so long as men in general have the grasping spirit, so long as they want all they can get

* "Mixed Essays," chapter on "Equality."

† "Meditations," ix. 29.

hold of, I do not see how it can matter much what the forms or machinery of society are ; in effect, we shall have about what we have now. Until men are democratized at heart, the forms of democracy count for little, as we are coming to learn in our own country. We have "triumphant democracy" talked of here by those who might more intelligently speak of the unparalleled opportunities for greed in democracy.

In the nature of the case, law or any species of compulsion can only be effective against a minority. The majority of men (yes, the large majority) must be revolutionized in their sentiments, "transformed by the renewing of their minds," before any greatly beneficent social revolution or transformation can take place. I must speak frankly ; to have labor, unmoralized, on top would not be a great improvement on the present *régime*, in which capital is on top. The way of service, of concession, is the only way to peace. Society does not want new bosses, but the abolition of the spirit of bossism, and an order of men and women who will make the service of the community their daily duty,—their religion, or part of it. The consuming thought must be that of brotherhood, of an equal realization by all of the great ends of existence ; in the spirit of the holy Buddha, we must learn to say, "Never will I receive private salvation ;" and with a modern poet find consolation for the present low state of society in looking forward to

" One common wave of thought and joy
Lifting mankind again." *

Will the moral forces of society arouse and clarify themselves, and win the strength that is possible to them in dealing with the grave problem now under discussion ? The history of slavery in this country should make us sober.

" We prayed for love to loose the chain ;
'Tis shorn by battle's axe in twain !" †

The German peasants made a few innocent demands in the time of Luther ; we should all of us now assent to their

* Matthew Arnold, "Obermann Once More."

† John G. Whittier, "Poetical Works" (Household edition), p. 357.

justice. But they were refused. The Protestant conscience was not clear enough, the Catholic conscience was not clear enough, or, if clear, neither was strong enough, as against the mass of prejudice, of unjust custom and law, on the other side ; hence the Peasants' War. Yet who will set limits to the possible development of moral power ? There is the incalculable, the unforeseeable, in human nature. For whom is it not enough to know that there are possibilities of victory in setting out on any noble enterprise ? Who demands certainty in advance ? Who is not willing to let it stand, that

" No good is certain, but the steadfast mind,
The undivided will to seek the good :
'Tis that compels the elements, and wrings
A human music from the indifferent air." *

The better instincts of human nature are against this disposition to take advantage of one another, which gives the key to our existing social order, and the fruits of which, though they are everywhere, are shown most plainly in the condition, circumstances, and low estate of those who do the manual labor of the world. Why cannot these better instincts be brought into play ? Here is a question which goes deeper than any special reform, though special reforms all have their place ; it touches the root of all reform. Why cannot a new spirit arise in the world ? What an inspiring moment was that in the history of the French Assembly of 1789, when, on the night of the 4th of August, one noble after another arose to propose the abolition of some ancient privilege, when men almost rivalled one another in enthusiasm and willingness to sacrifice for the public good ! What an inspiration was it which prompted the first Christians to part with their private possessions and turn the proceeds into a common fund, from which distribution should be made to all according to their needs ! I do not think it is demanded of men that the system of private property be given up. I think it most important that we should be sane in our enthusiasm ; but what possibilities of

* George Eliot, "The Spanish Gypsy," p. 123.

disinterestedness in human nature does such a fact as this of primitive Christian history reveal to us, and how slow should we be to set a limit to what similar forces may accomplish in the future in dealing with the problem now in mind!

It is a part of the religious traditions in which we have all been educated, to look ahead to a brighter day for humanity, to a victory of the nobler forces in the human spirit. The religion of Israel looked forward to a kingdom of heaven, when right and not might should rule, and Christianity took up the same strain. There is a profound truth in the attitude of the earnest Christian, who ever turns his thoughts to a better country and treats but lightly the ties that bind him to the present world. The present world is not fashioned according to right and justice, and cannot satisfy any true man. As some one has said, "Conscience and the present constitution of things are not corresponding terms; it is conscience and the issue of things which go together." * Conscience thus forces us to look ahead, else it is in danger of becoming a mere dream and dying from lack of sustenance. The modern world must take again the ancient attitude,—the attitude of an Augustine whose eyes and heart were fixed on a "City of God," the attitude of a Jesus who held that the meek,—*i.e.*, the suffering and lowly, or, in to-day's language, the working-people—should yet have their share of the inheritance of the earth, the attitude of an Isaiah who pictured the time when men should help every one his neighbor, and every one should say to his brother, Be of good courage.†

Already there are signs that may encourage us. The church is waking; society is waking; great voices are making themselves heard for justice and for brotherhood; the world of labor is itself getting a new consciousness, is disciplining itself, is learning within its own ranks the lessons of solidarity and mutual help. May the new spirit spread everywhere and bring some worthy consummation at last!

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* Davison, quoted by Matthew Arnold, "Literature and Dogma," chap. xi. § 4.

† Isaiah xli. 6.